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Conservation Corps and Life Change Leads Teen to Australian Adventure

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Javier Rodriguez, a teen from the mean streets of Los Angeles, never imagined he would step foot in Australia. But that's exactly what he did this week.

The 19-year-old from the Camarillo center of the California Conservation Corps was one of nine corps members from around the state selected for an annual work exchange program with a similar agency in Australia.

"I feel like I'm dreaming to be in my shoes now," Rodriguez said Tuesday.

On Wednesday, the exchange group left for the land Down Under, where members will spend the next two months working for Conservation Volunteers Australia, an environmental organization. Their work will include reptile surveys, beach cleanup, walking trail maintenance and data recording on wombats. They'll camp in the Aussie outback or live with host families.

Not long ago Rodriguez, a Los Angeles native, was in juvenile hall. It was there that he decided to change the course of his life, figuring if he didn't he'd either be dead soon or spending his life in and out of jail.

Rodriguez attended a job fair, where he learned about the Conservation Corps, a state agency that hires people ages 18 to 25 for a year or more of outdoor work and emergency response.

He applied and was accepted. In July 2008, Rodriguez arrived at the corps center in Lake Tahoe. But a month later his mother became gravely ill, and he asked for a transfer closer to Los Angeles.

Rodriguez moved to the Camarillo center, which is temporarily housed at a former elementary school in East Oxnard. About the same time, he enrolled in community college.

"I dedicated myself," said Rodriguez, who attended college four nights a week after a full day's work with the corps. "I didn't want to waste time. I felt I had wasted time in the past."

A year later, with 20 units under his belt, Rodriguez envisions a career as a probation officer. He said with his background he can relate to juvenile offenders and knows the approach to take to help them.

But before he leaves the Corps, Rodriguez wants to become a crew leader and earn a bachelor's degree in sociology. He also plans to use whatever spare time he has to do community service, including volunteering with the probation department.

"I learned how to give," Rodriguez said of the corps. "And I received a lot in return, which I'm grateful for."

He said he's gained selfconfidence in the corps and learned positive leadership skills and how to shoulder responsibility and behave in a professional manner.

"The CCC was, like, my lifesaver," Rodriguez said. "My life is so good, you know."

Summer Kincaid, corps coordinator for the Australian exchange, said 30 members from centers around the state applied for the program, and Rodriguez stood out from most.

Kincaid and a supervisor who'll accompany corps members on the trip selected the nine finalists. She said they considered the applicant's accomplishments in the corps, consistency in their behavior, work ethic and leadership skills, and the recommendation from their supervisor.

Teen's key to success

Chris Rochte, director of the Camarillo center, wrote Rodriguez's recommendation.

"He's really come a long way in our program," she said. "He's so well thought of by the staff and corps members—he's just fabulous."

Rochte said it's incredible that Rodriguez was able to save money from his earnings in the corps to pay for airfare to Australia while going to college and volunteering for more responsibility as a corps trainer.

Corps members earn minimum wage and, as is the case with all state employees, have three unpaid days off a month. All corps members chosen to go to Australia had to pay their airfare and provide their spending money.

Rodriguez, one of six children, said his mother and father are proud of him, and his experience has inspired his siblings. When his younger brother began to get into trouble, Rodriguez encouraged him to aim for higher goals. Now he's getting better grades in school and wants to join the corps when he's 18, Rodriguez said.

When Rodriguez visits his family in L.A., he often runs into old friends and encourages them to leave the streets behind and become productive citizens. Some don't listen, but others have followed him into the corps.

"If you don't try, you're never going to succeed," he tells them.

The California Conservation Corps and the Conservation Volunteers Australia have exchanged members for 21 years. Next month, several California Conservation Corps centers will host Australian exchange youths.